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Dalit Political Imagination and Replication in Contemporary Tamil Nadu

D. Karthikeyan, Stalin Rajangam and Hugo Gorringe

Tamil politics is dominated by the Dravidian parties and it is an indictment of their rule that untouchability and caste discrimination continue unabated in the state. Dalit movements arose in opposition, and as an alternative, to Dravidianism but have been shaped by their political context. A Dalit-Left alliance might offer one way out of the current impasse in Dalit politics.

Key Words: *Dalit politics; Dravidianism; Caste; Untouchability*

Continuing Marginalisation

The July 21 issue of EPW highlights some of the difficulties faced by, and the shortcomings of, Dalit politics in Tamil Nadu. The editorial rightly notes how practices of untouchability and casteist discrimination not only continue, but are often unchallenged in this the cradle of the Dravidian movement. It cannot be gainsaid that much Dalit politics revolves around issues of identity and occurs in the symbolic sphere. Likewise, the lack of Dalit leadership in the CPI(M) is a major omission that has prevented the communist party from emerging as a significant Dalit force. The editorial, however, does little to explain why Tamil Dalits face this predicament and, short of an implicit call for Dalit-Communist unity, it does little to suggest a resolution.

Dalit politics in the state, furthermore, currently stands at a crossroads. As some sub-Dalit groups are just starting to mobilise and organise themselves, existing Dalit parties are attempting to embrace the wider politics and identities of Tamil nationalism. Ambedkar, Marx and Lenin are neither unknown nor unread here though Phule is less prominent, and all four are less common than Periyar. Pandit Iyotha Thass and Rettaimalai Srinivasan in the past and a host of Dalit intellectuals from the 1980s onwards, have articulated a coherent counter-hegemonic discourse but they have been joined or even replaced on contemporary Dalit banners by LTTE Prabhakaran on the one hand and a host of caste-specific characters from history or mytho-history on the other. Taking our cue from the timely editorial we wish to use this paper to outline some of the reasons behind the continuing marginality of Dalits

in the state, reflect on current Dalit politics and conclude by considering some of the possible alternatives and avenues that are open to Dalit parties todayⁱ.

Dalit Politics in Context

If we are to understand Dalit politics in Tamil Nadu, then we should first stop expressing surprise and disappointment that untouchability persists in the land of Periyar. We need, at the outset, to appreciate that caste continues to be central to politics in the state not *despite* but *because* of the Dravidian parties. Numerous studiesⁱⁱ have demonstrated that the non-Brahmin movement in South India was precisely that: *non*-Brahmin rather than *anti*-Brahmin. Having wrested political power from the stranglehold of the Brahmin minority, the Backward and intermediate castes monopolised power in their turn. They used their dominance to stall ambitious land reform programmes and Adi-Dravidar Welfare schemes, whilst retaining a veneer of social radicalism thanks to schemes such as the nutritious mid-day meal.

The fractured nature of caste dominance in the state, where no one caste cluster is socially, numerically or politically pre-eminent, has veiled the extent to which social and political power are intertwined (Lakhsman 2007). Thevars, Gounders, Naickers, Nadars and Vanniyars all have pockets of dominance across the state and have been assiduously wooed by both the Dravidian parties. Caste majoritarianism is writ large in the prominence accorded to members of these castes in all government posts from police through panchayat leaders to ministerial berths. Post-Congress, Dalit MLAs have tended to attain distinction within Adi-Dravidar Welfare or minor departments. In a state governed by the non-Brahmin parties we can have a Brahmin chief minister but it is still almost unthinkable that a Dalit could attain that position.

Thus it is that the biggest ‘freebies’ associated with Tamil elections tend to go unremarked upon. Whilst the press go to town on the schemes to hand out colour TVs, laptops, mixies and cheap or free rice, much less attention is paid to the subsidies such as cheap electricity handed out to farmers and landlords. When programmes like the NREGA have threatened to deprive these dominant landowning castes of their supply of cheap labour they have vented their anger through protests and the formation of caste based organisations (De Neve & Carswell 2011). Populist rhetoric and Dravidian oratory, as Bate (2010) shows, work by emphasising the honour and glory

of pure Mother Tamil and glossing over uncomfortable ground realities. It is only the mobilisation of hitherto excluded castes that has revealed the caste character of state politics (Gorringe 2012).

Dravidian politics, in other words, has masked the caste basis of social structures and appealed to Dalit voters using populist imagery, symbolism and rhetoric – especially as translated to the public through the medium of Tamil cinema. When the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* split in 1972 the presence of two rival Dravidian parties further reduced voter options by turning Tamil elections into bi-polar contests. Unlike in UP, for instance, votes here tend to be split two ways meaning that a fairly high share of the vote is required to win in each constituency. This makes it exceedingly difficult for third parties to have an electoral impact. The first-past-the post electoral system similarly favours established parties (CERI 2009; Wyatt 2009). The upshot is that even national parties with effective party organisation and financial clout like the Communists fall into line with one or other of the DMK or ADMK come election time, leaving newer or smaller parties with few if any viable allies. In terms of Dalit politics more specifically, the above issues combine to mean that even in reserved constituencies non-Dalits tend to decide which Dalit will contest let alone win (Gorringe 2005).

As Dravidian hegemony has been challenged by the rise of smaller parties over the past two decades, elections have come to be associated with vote-buying, massive expenditure and corruption on a grand scale (EPW 2010). Even local council and Panchayat Presidential candidates currently spend several lakh rupees to secure election in expectation of the commissions that they will receive once in post. It is within this context that we need to engage with and voice our criticisms of contemporary Dalit and left politics. It is an oft repeated truism that had Communist or Dravidian parties implemented their promises, they would have rendered the emergence of the Dalit parties redundant. It is a measure of their failings in this regard that such mobilisation both was and is still necessary. Indeed, Dalit movements emerged with an informed, well articulated and clear sighted critique of existing politics (Karthikeyan 2009; Roberts 2010; Rajangam 2011). It is not in ideology or analysis that they are lacking so much as in implementation. Whilst we have no desire to exonerate Dalit politicians for moving away from these founding principles, it is

important to bear this socio-political context in mind when assessing their performance. Few institutions or organisations in the state – political or otherwise – are immune from the culture of immediate rewards and fewer still articulate a politics that breaks with Dravidian populism. Appraisals of Tamil Dalit politics should be rooted in an understanding of this backdrop.

Populism, Identity and Symbolism

Subramanian (1999) notes how Dravidian politics rests upon populist appeals to the ‘people’. He differentiates between ‘paternalist’ and ‘assertive’ forms of populism. The former revolves around a benevolent leader or patron who acts as a benefactor and protector of the needy. MGR – the three-time Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu - is held up as the archetype of such politics and was routinely portrayed as the champion of the poor and vulnerable. Assertive populism, by contrast, makes demands on behalf of excluded groups who wish to be admitted into the mainstream. As it is less top-down and entails making demands of elite groups, Harriss (2000) argues, it tends to be the preserve of upwardly mobile social groups. Populism, however, as Swamy (1998) notes, is often observed more in the sphere of rhetoric than programmes. It is this rhetoric, Bate (2010) argues, that has dominated Tamil politics for the past four decades.

Political challengers, thus, face an uphill struggle to get their voices heard let alone persuade voters to switch allegiance. Lacking resources and access to state benefits successive political challengers the state have had recourse to assertive forms of populism urging particular sub-sections of the population to assert themselves against discrimination and marginalisation. These appeals, perforce, hinge on identity. The *Paatali Makkal Katchi* (Toiling People’s Party), thus, emerged from the mobilisation of Vanniyars and demanded Most Backward Caste status for the group as well as benefits in proportion to their numerical strength. *Puthiya Tamilagam* (New Tamil Society) followed with calls for Pallars (a Scheduled Caste) to be recognised as *Devendra Kula Vellalars* and provided with various benefits. Shortly thereafter the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (VCK - Liberation Panther Party) mobilised mainly Paraiyars as first Dalits, then cheri-people and now downtrodden Tamils. In most cases caste-based mobilisations have aspired to positions from which they could

dispense paternalist largesse. Lacking the means to become patrons, they have time and again been forced back onto their identity to mobilise support.

Dalit politics, however, has always combined identity-based demands with calls for a more equitable distribution of resources. Whilst the mainstream discourse casts the Dalit parties merely as an extension of Dravidian politics, in actual fact they arose in opposition to the dilution of Periyarist ideals by the very parties that claim to carry forward his legacy. The key motto of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, for instance, is the Ambedkarite assertion that: 'caste annihilation is people's liberation'. They emerged seeking an alternative politics rather than a continuation of the status quo. Backed into a corner on the question of caste existing parties have been forced to give ground or address hitherto neglected issues. Whilst the CPI(M) has worked with Dalits since the outset on a class basis, their Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF) is a direct product of the Dalit upsurge. It is only following autonomous Dalit mobilisation that the Communists came to the realisation that caste had to be tackled head on. Even so, the TNUEF demonstrates the limitations of their approach to caste-based inequalities in that the focus is on tangible instances of untouchability rather than on the underlying structures of caste. They can, thus, mobilise to bring down a caste wall, but are much less effective at bringing down the walls that exist within people's minds. In other words, their actions are every bit as symbolic as those of the Dalit parties but are placed within a different frame of reference.

Activists point to the lack of Dalits in the upper echelons of the Communist Party as evidence of how far such organisations still have to travel to truly represent their concerns and voices. At least, though, their response has been a positive attempt to address caste discrimination. A more paradoxical outcome of Dalit mobilisation has been the way in which the dominant castes have recently embraced victimisation and portrayed themselves as at the receiving end of reverse casteism (De Neve & Carswell 2011). Hence there are calls for the repeal of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 and demands for party members to avoid cross-caste marriages. Recently such castes have also mobilised around this newfound victim mentality mustering around banners like the *Thevar Protection Front*, or *The Non-Dalit Common People's Association*. The lack of substance behind such demands, however, is seen in the respective significance accorded to the memorial days of Muthuramalinga Thevar and

Immanuel Sekaranⁱⁱⁱ. Where the city of Madurai is shut down for the celebration of the former, Dalits still struggle to have Immanuel Sekaran recognised as a major figure as was brutally demonstrated in the police firing on participants gathered in Paramakudi in 2011. Even though Dalit parties lack political power or influence to any great degree and even though ordinary Dalits still struggle to get cases filed or registered, the mere fact of their political participation has sufficed to create such counter-mobilisation.

That Dalits are ‘subjected to severe social repression’ today, thus, is not surprising, but there are two points to make here. Firstly, the stark violence that culminated in major riots and murders such as the murder of seven Dalits in broad daylight in Melavalavu in 1997 has declined as Dalits have fought back in kind or in court. Secondly, that acts of untouchability continue to be raised is also, in some ways, a sign of change. Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998) point towards the emergence of ‘new’ forms of caste violence that arise in response to the subaltern challenge. On the one hand Dalit activism brings issues to light in a way that has not happened before and brings everyday repression into the open. Their role in spreading a legal awareness and rights consciousness amongst the oppressed cannot be over-stated. On the other hand, the sort of counter-mobilisation described above pits socially-dominant intermediate castes against those who dare to question their dominance.

As Pandian (2000) and Rajangam (2011, 2012b) highlight, most anti-Dalit violence in the state is perpetrated by the intermediate castes and occurs to demonstrate that they are of higher status than their victims. In Parali Puthur (in Southern Tamil Nadu) for instance, intermediate caste Mutharaiyars ransacked and set light to Dalit homes, beat villagers and threatened children due to the fact that VCK cadre dared to hoist their flag near the main road. In neighbouring Pudukottai District, however, tea-shops serve *both* Mutharaiyars and Dalits with separate glasses because they are seen as lower than, and as a threat towards, Kallar supremacy. Marx is certainly not irrelevant in this context but it is, we would suggest, the intermediate castes who have greater need to absorb his lessons.

Caste-ing Votes: Dalit Electoral Politics

It is important to note that Tamil Dalit politics cannot be viewed in isolation. Although it is a huge disappointment that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* and *Puthiya Tamilagam* have not been able to create more change or apply pressure on their coalition allies to do so, we need to recognise that they operate in a political environment that severely limits their options. Dalit parties cannot win on their own in this state in part due to the bipolar nature of politics. Where votes are split two or, at most, three-ways Dalit parties simply do not have the numbers to succeed. They need, therefore, to find likely allies. Unlike Vijayakant – the latest film star to enter politics – they also lack the financial clout to compete. They are therefore reduced to seeking coalition partners who will not only grant them a reasonable number of constituencies from which to contest but will help bankroll their campaigns as well. Given the monetarisation of Tamil politics over the past decade (EPW 2010) their lack of self-reliance serves to curb their radicalism.

Dalit political parties, thus, are caught in a double bind. Either they follow the template set by others and are condemned to remain bit-part players in a system that favours the resource-rich. They are, then, impotent paternalists reduced to feeding from the scraps distributed by the two main parties – VCK MLA Ravikumar, in this vein, hailed the DMK scheme to replace mud huts with concrete houses as a triumph of political participation (Jayakumar 2010). Failing this, they can focus upon assertive, identity-based rhetoric that is either symbolic such as the furore over the Ambedkar cartoon, or is rarely realised in practice. Whether standing alone or in alliance, furthermore, Dalit parties require the votes of other communities to stand any chance of winning (Karthikeyan 2011; Roberts 2010). They have, to this end, increasingly adopted an assertive *Tamil* identity and offered posts in the party to non-Dalits in a bid to broaden their vote-base.

This has created a gap between the parties and their core Dalit constituents, but has failed to expand their vote-base significantly. In the current political dispensation this means that Dalit parties can either stand alone and win nothing but respect from supporters, or they can ally with various other parties and compromise on their core principles in search of political power. That allying with Dravidian parties should entail a dilution of anti-caste radicalism is, of course, a major indictment of those parties but it is a pressing problem for Dalit politics. This is not, of course, a purely

Tamil issue as seen in CERI's (Campaign for Electoral Reforms in India) call for proportionate representation to: 'ensure the participation of all communities in governance, and check all tendencies to usurp ... power by some caste groups in India (CERI 2009: 15).

New Directions?

Over the course of the past few years these contradictions have increasingly been acknowledged by the various Dalit leaders who have sought to rethink and reconfigure where they stand. Dalit politics in the state has tended to be ideologically inspired, but event sensitive. For all the theoretical and rhetorical commitment to land reforms, caste eradication, class equality and women's rights, for instance, the emphasis of each party tends to be on day-to-day issues of discrimination with a few big conferences on the core themes to emphasise commitment. From this perspective the Dalit movements continue to be shaped by the imperatives of the present; responding to one crisis after another rather than building up an alternative (Karthikeyan 2009). Now that they have contested elections and gained a number of political victories, however, voters expect more than empty or aggressive rhetoric. One unintended consequence of Dalit assertion was to compel Communist parties to take Dalits issues more seriously now, ironically, it is the grassroots campaigns of TNUEF amongst Dalits across the state that has forced the Dalit Parties to reconnect with their own constituents.

The VCK, thus, has embarked on a process of wholesale restructuring in a bid to reach out to the mainstream. The demand for gold to celebrate Thirumavalavan's 50th birthday arises at this juncture. The comparison with Mayawati here is unfair. Whilst there is an element of self-aggrandisement, a better point of reference might be the Bahujan Samaj Party's motto 'one member, one rupee', in that the object of the gold is to bolster party finances so as to launch a TV channel that will provide them with a media presence. In a state where the reach of television is remarkably high due to free distribution and where each political party has their own channel such a focus is understandable. Whether it should be their *primary* focus or not is another question, but setting that aside, the call for gold has been too easy a target for many commentators. It certainly carries the whiff of dowry especially when party leaders urge members to treat this as the unmarried Thirumavalavan's wedding. Take away

the ever present contradictions around women's rights and the talk of treasure, though, and what you have is a party transparently seeking to raise resources from its members. How many other parties could offer as clear a trail to the assets that finance(d) their media enterprises? The call for gold not only carries a novelty factor that encourages donations, according to several respondents it is more easily accounted for than cash donations. The issue for us is less the emphasis on gold than whether the money thus raised will be used to good effect. The fear is that the acquisition of a media channel will simply fuel the short-term emphasis of Dalit politics in the state when it is crying out for a longer-term vision.

In short, it would be fair to say that the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu *educated* its constituents to some degree and *agitated* society for a time but has failed to properly *organise* itself. Dalit parties still lack infrastructure, established secondary leaders, local offices and sustained, ideologically driven campaigns. As such they have failed to move onto next level as they promised to do when they entered elections as a Third Front in 1999. Unless this period of introspection results in a change of direction then Dalit Politics will continue to be characterised by an emphasis on symbolism and identity. Worse still, even as caste walls between Dalits and caste Hindus have been dismantled new walls have taken root between different *Dalit* castes. The absorption of brahminical values of hierarchy and untouchability by Dalits represents perhaps the single biggest failure of, and challenge to, Tamil Dalit movements.

Adversity can occasionally lead to opportunities, however, and recent intra-Dalit caste violence in W. Pudhupatti compelled Dalit leaders to come together with the CPI(M) in July 2012 in search of possible solutions. This meeting was hosted by Yakkan, a Dalit intellectual, who is one step removed from the compulsions of politics. His intervention reminds us that Dalit liberation cannot and should not be left in the hands of Dalit Parties alone. Dalit unions, intellectuals, administrators and organisations have a key role to play too. Dalit movements need to accept practical guidance and advice from outside since electoral politics, which was initially seen as a tactic, has become an end in itself (Karthikeyan 2011). More energy and money is expended on seeking election than realising the movement's objectives. There is a need for clarity of purpose and a longer term vision that extends beyond the coalition partners of tomorrow to consider Dalit livelihoods. Rather than running after and trying to please

and appease potential allies by cheering them on, offering them support or awarding them prizes, Dalit and Communist parties could then formulate a coherent and radical programme of action that combines the demands of recognition with those of redistribution. Clearly there are commonalities of interest between the Communist and Dalit parties but the onus must be on the former with their national level standing and resources to take the lead. It is perhaps from meetings such as that at W. Pudhupatti that an alternative politics which challenges the hegemony of the Dravidian parties and truly addresses the needs of the impoverished and subordinated masses can emerge.

ⁱ The empirical detail in this paper is drawn from recent research carried out by the three authors. Gorringe has conducted research on Tamil Dalit Politics (ESRC Grant RES-062-23-3348), as a reporter for *The Hindu* Karthikeyan frequently covers issues related to Dalit politics, and Rajangam has conducted extensive research on Dalits and Dalit politics across the state most recently for his 2012 book on the Villupuram riots in 1978 (Rajangam 2012a).

ⁱⁱ For detailed accounts of the interplay between caste and Dravidianism see: Karthikeyan 2009, 2011, 2012; Lakhsman 2007; Rajangam 2012b; Subramanian 1999; Wyatt 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar was a Forward Bloc leader who mobilised members of the intermediate Kallar, Maravar and Agamudayar castes who comprise the Thevar caste category. Immanuel Sekaran was a Pallar Dalit leader who fought against caste discrimination and dominance and was murdered during caste clashes in 1957.

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